

A sermon preached by  
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Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church  
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TEXT: Romans 12  
Exodus 1: 8-21

## METAMORPHOSIS

Practicing the Christian faith takes discipline. It takes time. It takes commitment to the long haul and the big picture. All of which goes counter to our secular world, where rapid change, instant gratification, and political alliances seem to be the order of the day. As much as I try to stay rooted in a daily discipline of prayer and hope and faithful service, I have found that these endless pandemic days are trying my soul and tarnishing my better self. My sense is that in these anxious times, most of us yearn for a more rooted, a more balanced, a more spirit filled life. But the question is, how do we get from here to there?

Paul gives us an answer this morning in this pivotal passage from his letter to the Romans. In just a few verses, the apostle gives us some spiritual medicine for our weary souls. "Offer yourselves," he says. "Offer yourselves to God - all of who you are - offer yourselves as a living sacrifice. Not as a dead burnt animal offering - as they did back in ancient time. But, instead, as a living human offering. Offer your energy, your love, your creativity, your yearnings, your dreams, your needs, your sweat, your tears, your heart. Offer it all. And then once you have lifted yourself up - once you have offered yourself to God - then expect God to grab you, to transform you, to fill you, to renew you, body and soul.

These familiar, wonderful words! "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by God." "Conform" grows out of the Greek word **schema** - schematic - the predictable scheme of things. Paul's warning is clear. Don't always take the predictable shape that the world suggests - the latest fad - the coolest look - the newest thing. Do not conform. Do not, in other words, be a chameleon. Don't tell people only what they want to hear. Don't act only the way other people expect.

One pastor writes: "The other day I saw a chameleon - the first I'd seen in a long time. He was as green as the leaf on which he rested. I watched him closely or I would have lost him when he moved from the leaf onto a brown limb and changed color. Watching that amazing creature of nature, I remembered Carl Sandburg's story about the chameleon who did well changing its colors to match his environment - until one day he accidentally crawled onto a scotch plaid sport coat. At which point the chameleon had a nervous breakdown, heroically trying to relate to everything at once. I know some folks who are stressed out, tension ridden, depleted of self-identity, bereft of self-confidence because they are trying to be all things to all persons. People were never meant to be chameleons. So why don't we quit trying?" (Maxie Dunham, **Perceptions**, p. 44)

Do not conform to the ways of the world - but be transformed by the mercies of God. The Greek root for transform is **metamorphosis** - that amazing process where our essence - our God image - stays the same - but the shape and structure of our living completely dissolves and is recreated in a new form, a new creation. How metamorphosis happens is a mystery - creation out of chaos - butterflies out of caterpillars - balanced, joyful living out of stretched and stressed humanity. Yes, metamorphosis is a mystery, because it is God's work - mystery which we need to allow, which we need to invite, which we need to make room for. I invite you, by the mercies of God, to offer yourselves - so you can be transformed - so that metamorphosis can happen in your life.

This morning Paul outlines certain behaviors and values and disciplines that create the space for transformation in the midst of a conformist world. At first these behaviors may seem difficult. But, my friends, when we think about it, we know how important discipline is. It is the discipline of practice that creates the sonata. It is the discipline of workouts that wins the race.

Now let's be clear. Refusing to conform is our work. But being transformed is God's work. And so we offer ourselves to make ourselves ready - ready for God to change us. And Paul gives us some hints about how we can get ready. I like to play around with words of scripture. And so, this is what I hear Paul saying to us today:

Be dependable and trustworthy in your love for others.  
Hate evil and cling, tenaciously, to that which is good.  
Be affectionate and tender with one another.  
Honor others before you honor yourself.  
Be zealots for God.  
Keep your spirit at a boiling point.  
Seize new opportunities.  
Where there is no hope, hope and hope and hope again.  
Endure tough times.  
Be persistent in prayer.  
Share what you have generously.  
Be eager to become hospitality for others.

Interesting advice. Difficult advice. Advice which is beautifully modeled for us by two odd sounding women in this morning's Exodus lesson.

The story of Shiprah and Puah is one of those gems tucked into the Hebrew scriptures – a vivid story rarely taught in Sunday School. When my husband and I were naming our children, we knew we wanted to give them biblical names. Well, Shiprah and Puah were high on my list. But, in order to be kind to our daughter, we named her Anna instead.

The plot of this Exodus story is clear. Many years after the golden days of Joseph, a new Pharaoh comes to power, and the Hebrew people are enslaved by the Egyptians. But somehow the Jews manage to thrive anyway - despite their poverty and hard labor. Such fertility and resilience has begun to threaten the very power and stability of the Egyptian empire. And so

Pharaoh cooks up a simple solution. Foreshadowing King Herod centuries later, he orders that all the male babies born to the Hebrew slaves must be killed. But, this cold blooded pragmatist fails to factor in the defiance of a woman's heart. The midwives, Shiprah and Puah, simply refuse to obey.

Pink, green, purple or yellow - Hebrew, Egyptian or Martian - it really doesn't matter. A baby is a baby. A child is a child. Every birth is the birth of God's possibility in the world. And so, risking their own lives in order to nurture new life, Shiprah and Puah defy Pharaoh. They welcome the children. They protect the children. And one of the babies they deliver is Moses. The rest, of course, is history.

These feisty, faithful women enable the unfolding of the whole story of liberation and freedom for God's people. They proclaim to tyrants and terrorists in all times and all places, that the power of love simply must triumph over the love of power. Obeying the words of faithfulness that are captured by Paul years later, these women hate evil. They cling to good. They endure tough times. And with great zeal, they welcome new life – no matter what the cost. Shiprah and Puah refuse to conform – so that God can transform the world.

Paul's advice to us this morning is not guaranteed to make us rich. It won't win an election or eradicate a pandemic. But it might give us the tools to endure. It might give us the joy, the balance, the rhythm, the integrated integrity that we are all yearning to find. The Christian life is not a passive life. Hear again the urgency of Paul's advice. Hate. Cling. Endure. Boil. Seize. Hope. Persist. Paul's words describe a focus, an intensity, a zeal every bit as demanding as the secular ethics of power and money and prestige. But as Shiprah and Puah remind us, cherishing abundant life for all – offering OUR lives to give life to others – this discipline can ground us and get us through the toughest days of our living.

There is an old story about a country boy who had a great talent for carving beautiful dogs out of wood. Every day he sat on his porch whittling, letting the shavings fall around him. One day a visitor, greatly impressed, asked him the secret of his art. "I just take a block of wood and whittle off the parts that don't look like a dog," he replied. (Kidd, **When the Heart Waits**, p. 49) My friends, a Christian life, shaped by faithful practice, shaped by intentional discipline, this is a form of spiritual whittling - a way of offering ourselves to God, so that God can shave off the parts that don't look like the God-image in us. Through the sacred use of our time, through the sacred use of our money, through the sacred use of our skill and intellect and creativity, we are inviting God to whittle away - to change us, to transform us, to complete us. And we are encouraging God to use us to change, to transform, to complete the world.

This is the Good News of the Christian faith.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen .